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ABSTRACT

The impact of significant family life events on child educational outcomes was examined for a sample of 204 families in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, whose children began kindergarten in 1992, 1993, or 1994. These children and families were part of the Head Start Transition Demonstration Project, a longitudinal study to assess benefits of services like those provided by Head Start to families and children during the first few years of public school. Families were interviewed, during which parent questionnaires--styled similarly to Sarason et al (1978) Life Event Scale--were completed. The most frequently occurring events were change in employment, death in the close family, gaining a new family member, and separation of the responding parent and her/his partner. Preliminary results included a significant negative relationship between the total number of life events a child experiences and his or her achievement scores. Children who experience more major life events achieve less in school. (Contains 10 references.) (BGC)

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The Impact of Significant Life Events on Children During Their First Three Years of School

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Introduction

Can children who experience the death of someone close to them, or the marriage of their parent, or a move to a new home be expected to succeed in school at the same rate as their peers who do not experience such events? How are the events that occur at home connected to what a child does in the classroom? Presented here is preliminary information on the connection between significant life events that children and families face and the impact of those events on children's educational outcomes. Data discussed in this paper are based on a sample of 204 families in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, whose children began kindergarten in 1992, 1993, or 1994. These children and families are participating in the Head Start Transition Demonstration Project. This project, currently operating in 31 sites nationwide, is a longitudinal study to assess the benefits of providing services like those provided in Head Start to families and children during the child's first few years of public school. In the North Carolina Transition Project children and families receive assistance from a Family Services Coordinator in the areas of social services, health, and parent involvement. An Educational Coordinator works with each

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child, family, and school, to provide educational support through individual instruction, group enrichment programs for children and families, and teacher training opportunities.

Sample and Procedure

A randomization procedure divided the six local schools into three that receive services and three that do not. Both treatment and control groups include families whose children attended Head Start, and those who would have been eligible but did not attend. Extensive data are being gathered about child academic achievement and social adjustment, and family background and functioning. As part of a lengthy family interview parents are asked 15 questions about events that have occurred in their lives in the past 12 months. The questionnaire is styled somewhat like the Sarason, et al. (1978) Life Event Scale, but it is not as comprehensive. Parents are asked the same questions annually for four years. The questions cover any changes in marital status, shifts in family membership, illness, death, relocation and employment changes.

All events were considered to be events that would effect the child's life in some way. Some events were clearly negative (the death of someone important to the child); others were either positive or neutral (parent being married); and some were clearly not good, but may not have strongly affected the child (family member going to jail). An overall summary of the data collected to date is shown in Table 1.

Literature Review

Current literature indicates that there is a significant relationship between child outcomes (for example: scores on achievement tests, school attendance, and social skills) and the number of significant life events that a family experiences. Some researchers

have used life events as one element in creating a "risk index" or measure of stress. Sameroff, et al. (1993) used a variety of information, including stressful life events, to create a family risk score and found that the amount of risk present in a child's life was a determinant of the child's intellectual development. Reynolds, et al. (1992) found significant life events to be related to competence behavior, problem behavior, and school absences for inner-city kindergartners and first graders.

In a study of children who had transferred to new schools, Filippelli and Jason (1992) found that children with two or more negative life events showed lower scores on academic and self-concept measures than students with no negative life events. Berden, et al. (1990) examined the relationship between major life events and changes over two years in behavioral and emotional problems of children, as reported by their parents. Children with lower socioeconomic status showed a higher incidence of negative life events and those children who had experienced more events had more behavioral and emotional problems. Wills, et al. (1992) have shown that negative life events are related to higher levels of substance use among 11 to 13 year olds. A study of psychological symptoms of children by Kliewer and Sandler (1992) showed that young girls (aged 8-16 years old) who had low self-esteem showed high psychological maladjustment when faced with many major life events.

One of the reasons that life events may have an impact on child functioning is that they diminish the parent's capacity for consistent and involved parenting. McLoyd (1990) found that economic hardship rendered parents more vulnerable to negative life events, and that economic hardship affects children's socioemotional functioning.

Results and Discussion

A summary of the data shows that the average of the total number of life events per child during their kindergarten and first grade years is 3.03. The most frequently occurring events are change in employment (32%), death in the close family (27%), gaining a new family member (21%) and separation of the responding parent and her/his partner (25%). Many families have experienced serious illness (24%) and 11% of families have a close family member in jail (see Table 1). Data presented here cover the first two years of school: Kindergarten and first grade for Cohort I (n = 86) and Cohort II (n = 67); and only Kindergarten for Cohort III (n = 51). Participants will remain with the project for four years, so more data must be collected for all groups before final analysis can be done. Results presented here are preliminary, and may not show the same outcomes when all of the data are included.

With this caveat, correlations show interesting initial results. There is a significant negative relationship between the total number of life events a child experiences and his/her achievement scores (see Table 2). Children who experience more major life events achieve less in school. The fact that the relationship is significant for all 4 Subtests of the Woodcock - Johnson Tests of Achievement and the Peaboby Picture Vocabulary Test strengthens this finding, although the analysis will not be complete until all of the information has been added to the data base. Contrary to some of the literature on life events, correlations between total number of life events and social skills factors (cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, or self control) or number of days absent from school did not show significant relationships. The number of respondents varies

between correlations somewhat due to attrition and the fact that not all families responded to every question each time data was collected.

There is also a positive, moderately weak relationship ($r = .236$, $p = .0039$) between the number of events that a family has at the initial interview and the number of events that a family has at the follow-up interview (see Table 3). Families that experience more major life events are likely to continue to experience more of these events than families who do not experience many major events. If this trend holds true for a family over time, and if the child's academic outcomes are affected by the number of major life events that he/she faces, then the child's chances of good long-term educational outcomes may be at risk.

Because this measure does not lend itself well to factor analysis due to the dichotomous nature of the responses, the questions were empirically grouped into three categories that distinguish between very serious negative events (death, serious illness, etc.), less serious negative events (separation from family member, etc.), and neutral events (marriage of parent, move, etc.). There is a significant positive moderate relationship between the number of very serious negative events that a child faces at entry into the study, and the number of very serious negative events that the child will face two years later ($r = .23$, $p<.0046$). Not only do those families who have many major life events continue to have many events, but those families who have very serious negative events continue to have very serious negative events over time. Considering the correlations that show that major life events have a significant negative impact on a child's educational outcome, it may be difficult to mitigate such events with the kind of

"treatment" that is available through the Transition Project or with a traditional educational curriculum. Program results, or lack thereof, may be explained to some degree by the level of stress a family or child is facing, regardless of the amount of "treatment" they receive.

There is also a significant positive moderate relationship ($r = .23$, $p < .0013$) between the number of events the family experiences and the parent's description of their frequency of depression (see Table 2). Parents who experience more events say that they are more frequently depressed. Many studies have shown the negative effect of maternal depression and maternal distress on child outcomes. In a study of behavior problems of young children Rose, et al. (1989) found that maternal depression and negative life events correlated strongly with problem behaviors for 4 and 5 year old children.

Many researchers combine such factors as maternal depression and the number of stressful life events to create risk indices. This kind of analysis will be done with these data when the study is complete. As noted by Rutter (1992), "..advances in life events research need to ...take the social context of events into account, ... appreciate the importance of long term difficulties as well as acute events, and examine the role of vulnerability and protective mechanisms in determining individual differences in response to life events."

Table 1

Listed below are the frequencies by percent for the 203 respondents. Families were asked these questions each year, but were asked not to repeat describing any event which they had noted the previous year, so that no event should be included more than once.

YES %		
6.9	1.	Did you get married?
12.8	2.	Did you become engaged to be married?
2.5	3.	Did you get divorced?
25.1	4.	Did you separate from your partner (spouse, girl/boy friend)?
21.2	5.	Did you gain a new family member (through birth, adoption, someone moving in)?
8.4	6.	Did you separate from a family member (older child or other relative moved out)?
26.6	7.	Was there a death of someone important in the child's life?
25.6	8.	Was there a major change in your living conditions (move, other)?
6.4	9.	Has a family member been the victim of a violent crime?
8.9	10.	Has your child lived with someone else at some point during the past year?
23.6	11.	Has a family member had a serious illness?
10.8	12.	Has a family member been jailed or in prison?
32.0	13.	Has there been a change in your work (new job, lost job, new location)?
12.8	14.	Has there been a change in your partners work (new job, lost job, new location)?
13.8	15.	Have there been any other event(s) which you think have affected you or your child in the past year? (often includes custody disputes, being ignored by absent parent)

Table 2

Pearson Product Moment Correlations Between Number of Major Life Events and Child and Parent Outcomes.

Outcomes	r	p	n
Child Outcomes			
Peabody Score	-.18	.0102	202
WJ Letter-Word Identification	-.20	.0037	202
WJ Passage Comprehension	-.21	.0028	202
WJ Calculation	-.24	.0006	202
WJ Applied Problems	-.24	.0005	201
Parent Outcomes			
Times Depressed in past week	.23	.0013	201
Family Income	-.22	.0020	196

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Categories of Events per Year with Pearson Correlations for Categories for Entry Data vs. Follow-up at 21-24 months later.

	Mean (n=203)	Pearson Correlations, Entry vs. Follow-up		
		r	p	n *
Total Number of Life Events	3.03 (2.81)	.236	.0039	152
Number of Neutral Events	1.42 (1.57)	.132	.1093	152
Number of Less Serious Negative Events	0.67 (0.98)	.179	.0293	152
Number of Very Serious Negative Events	0.94 (1.20)	.232	.0046	152

* Only Cohorts I and II have Follow-up Data at this point.

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